

TO INTRODUCE THE PSYCHOLOGICAL PROBLEM OF WAR VICTIMS

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If we must sum up in a word the still perceptible damage done by the war waged to Vietnamese people by US troops, after French armed forces, we would talk about the attack on supports¹ normally allowing a population's existence.

As psychiatrists, psychologists and psychoanalysts having received an anthropological education, we deal with these problems in a pluridisciplinary spirit. Moreover, our reasoning is supposed to be scientific, but it is not essentially academic. It turns towards action in favour of populations affected by what probably remains in modern history as the most foul crime against mankind. Our observation revolves chiefly around A Luoi valley, and it is complemented in Hanoi by life stories and clinical elements. We focus our talk on consequences of the chemical war aimed at devastating the biotope of mountainous people in Central Vietnam and on war traumas.

The valley of A Luoi is situated on the frontier between Vietnam and Laos, on the highlands near Hue, that is to say in the south of the 17th parallel. This area was, in the old days, occupied by a dense tropical forest, where were found very tall trees and a abundant fauna, among which were tigers and wild elephants. The few archive photographs show us beautiful Pa Ko, Ta Oi and Co Tu villages with houses on stilts. The population lives on hunting, gathering forest plants and slash-and-burn farming. Its religion is often animist, and totemic with food taboos is still observed. Shamanism seems to be the ancestral background of their culture, and healing practices come back to the surface after being quelled. The languages spoken by those ethnic minorities are quite different from the Vietnamese, and belong to the Mon-Khmer linguistic family of the East.

Plan of the chapter

We successively deal with (1) the destruction of symbolical supports that organize, in tradition, the sense of life, as well as the solutions which those populations have set up to make up for these destructions; (2) the break in psychical² continuity and the psycho-traumas peculiar to three revealing situations: ^[a] the

¹ The word "support" is largely used in sociological literature. On the whole, it trivially denotes what concretely sustains the subject in his social life: family, job, income, property, etc...It also has an important philosophical tradition. [See: Robert Castel, *Metamorphoses of the social question*, Gallimard, 1999].

² Psychical: that concerns the spirit, the thought.

immediate and visible destruction of Nature by defoliants and herbicides, ^[b] the invisible effect of dioxin and ^[c] more “ordinary” war traumas; (3) the representation of traumas in shamanist cultures like those of the Ta Oi, Co Tu and Pa Ko in A Luoi valley.

1. The destruction of symbolical supports in the traditional society and the resymbolization work

We talk here about the spiritual connection with Nature, as well as with the genii of earth, forest and water. The forest has disappeared. The genii (termed *giàng* in Vietnamese) have moved farther as a very old Pa Ko said to us. This man has told us how, in these acres of grassland, he went catching young elephants in the forest to domesticate. In other words, the disappearance of biotope has not only been a foul ecological crime, leading to the disappearance of means of existence of hunters-gatherers who lived earlier on forest. It is a cultural ethnocide to the extent that all supports of the connection with the other world³ have been destroyed by this systematic chemical war.

In the face of this destruction, the Pa Co, Ta Oi and Co Tu adapted themselves by reinvesting their world in the two large dimensions of symbolization processes: 1) the major processes linked to the working of Culture (S. Freud), or in other words, what induces people or groups of people to fall, subjectively and objectively, within the scope of a particular civilization that is part of a more universal whole: the human world, mankind and its history; 2) the work with limited ends, but it is essential to the cultural survival of human groups, the “patching up” of beliefs and rites.

³. Perrin, *Le chamanisme*, PUF, Que sais-je?, 1955.

1.1. Resymbolization in the working of Culture.

During the “American war”, minority people have lived through an attempt on genocide and ethnocide, or in other words, an attempt at biologically destroying people and their culture, effacing their traces on earth. They were especially faced up to things and rebuilt their coherence in the participation to the war. Therefore, their important role has been acknowledged by the highest authorities of the country, since their fighting spirit, already demonstrated against French troops, has bothered “American” occupying forces. This unquestionable role has helped them go down in history.

This element of coherence has all the more been important as it was not essentially the result of an enrolment by the sole discipline. And when we now ask minority people from A Luoi valley the reasons leading them to help the *bo doi*, for example in carrying ammunition with baskets on their back, each one gives a personal answer. According to some people, they did so to drive back an invader who used most cruel means to reach his end; for others, they participated to an impulse of the whole community; some said ⁴they join the guerilla to find a chance of survival, given the extermination means used by the “Americans”.

This value of History, to restructure those social groups, results in what is termed

⁴. One fifth of people we met in different villages in A Luoi called themselves Ho. This observation induces us to wonder on the population constitution: Do they particularly feel themselves Uncle Ho’s heirs? Moreover, this practice is not isolated in Vietnam. Are there characteristics shared by collective situations that give rise to them? Anyhow, this phenomenon seems symbolical.

“historical religion” by Henri Maître, marked for example by the fact that some lineages already have Ho Chi Minh’s surname.⁴

All that singularly configures the situation of people living in A Luoi valley. Marginal in the country, dispersed and demographically insignificant, confined in poverty and archaism, those people centrally participated in an essential moment of national history, which itself has deeply marked world history, account taken of the considerable consequence that the US military defeat entailed in Vietnam, in the second half of the 20th century. The question is to know to what extent these singular place and part of minority people in this region are acknowledged, particularly by young generations. We will go back to this question.

Resymbolization by beliefs and rites “cobbled together”

The animist nature of the relation between these minority people with what is considered by them as the supernatural world gives cause for a remarkably pragmatic relation to their social group’s cultural apparatus. The populations developed a spirit of resourcefulness rather similar, in the register of ideas, to what they can have *vis à vis* deteriorated daily instruments. For instance, we were told that “wandering souls” are supposedly numerous in this area where so many people were not properly buried (their corpses had been mutilated when they were buried), reported missing, or dead without leaving descendants. These numerous souls, elusive and disquieting, can be likened to grasshoppers that fly away when we walk in the meadow. This is not just a metaphor of souls that supposedly belong to another register of reality: grasshoppers “are” wandering souls. And, as it is more simple to catch those insects than

wandering souls, to seize them and to bury them in a box then seem like a salutary exercise of the “soul’s guide”⁵.

“When people die far away from home, and their corpses are not brought back to be interred, a good deal of grasshoppers can be caught and put in a box. People then think it is the dead person’s soul, and grasshoppers are buried in the box”. (A Pa Ko village, A Luoi)⁶.

Attacks on the continuity of psychological life.

Psycho-traumas

All processes we have called up can be considered as collective answers to psycho-traumas we are going to explain in detail. So doing, we are about to contemplate three causes of collective psychological traumas: effects of defoliants and herbicides, dioxin, and more “classical” war traumas.

⁵ The man who leads the souls to the burial-ground.

In Nebaj (Guatemala), where the Maya Quiché population is victim of a genocidal attempt sponsored by the CIA, “interments” without corpse are conducted. The dead person’s nearest relatives choose a “godfather”. The procession leaves the house during the night to come to the burial-ground. The *maya* cross at the head of the procession is carried by the godfather, followed with the shaman, the women, while men walk at the back. The crosses are put in a chapel of the burial-ground, where families come regularly to celebrate rituals. With such rites, the community wants to guide the deceased’s soul to the burial-ground. This occurs during the night because people think the deceased, coming from the netherworld, can “see” more easily in the dark than in broad daylight.

⁶ Such a ritual combines two dimensions of symbolism. It is anthropological and psychological. On one hand, it is an act of culture, that redoes the world order where this order is muddled up (no human being may be refused burial). On the other, such an artifice is based on the intellectual construction of a symbolical instrument, which is similar to that brought to the fore by Sigmund Freud in his grandson (Ernest Wolfgang)’s game.

2. Traumas of defoliants and herbicides: the disfigured nature

More than the immediate horror, the account of feelings of people that have witnessed the spread of defoliants and herbicides are marked, in their memory, by the amazement in the face of an extraordinary phenomenon.

For example, among the life stories gathered by Nguyen Dam Thu and Pham Huong Thao, the one by Mr. O relates how his unit supplied as best they can the *bo doi* with food and ammunition during a difficult period, from 1968 to 1971, when the Ho Chi Minh trail was constantly interrupted by bombings and floods. And the first moment of the tale is that of innocent illusions: poisons were spread by enemy aircraft, and young soldiers were “*like children who knew nothing*”. They even rushed up to see this wonder: “*they spread something in the afternoon, it is beautiful. [...] These barrels (dropped by planes) are even used to hold water*”.

This first paradoxical reaction, aiming at overcoming the sense of anxiety by an incongruous psychical excitation, has been observed in other catastrophes.

Less innocent were the reactions of three ex-servicemen we met at A Dot, who were inured to defoliants since they occupied particularly exposed posts (they worked in intelligence near an “American” base). These people were struck by the immediacy of the damage done to the forest: “*Tree leaves withered right away*”. Moreover, this unknown oily product caused itchiness and loss of consciousness that must be treated with active carbon and sugarcane jus. Yet nevertheless, “*we thought that the poison was*

only used to destroy vegetation. People did not know that it also acts on humans”.

So, at this first moment, attention was paid to the familiar Nature that appeared disfigured like in a distorting mirror. Fish in the river became “fluorescent”. Nutritive tubers were dark and swollen, trees were quickly denuded of their leaves, animals were dying, humans felt strangely uneasy...Then came the disaster. People lived until then with a Nature whose caprices can be thwarted, as they hoped, in a dialogue with imaginary beings, dangerous and malicious, that settled the “super nature”. They held a dialogue with this world of local and specialized genii that can appear as the counterpart of the human society. But another unknown destructive Nature emerges from this sticky substance spread by enemy aircraft, the defoliants. No negotiation with divinities about some misfortune or other is effective, as the disappearance of the known Nature is an unbelievable event. Tree leaves are denuded. The forest is dying. Water kills fish. The earth is unrecognizable. Human beings scatter if their villages are destroyed. The forest is irreversibly affected:

The forest? In the old days, there were such big trees that three or four people must join hands to clasp their trunk. There were precious wood, wild animals. Pa Ko houses were very long, each having 12 rooms. Each family inhabited a room, while two rooms at the middle are for visitors. All that has disappeared”. [War veterans from A Dot].

Reflections on the explanations of disasters

As we have remarked, natural catastrophes and disasters caused by man don't provoke the same traumas. On the whole, natural

catastrophes assemble victims, arouse compassion, and resort to explanations that often were supernatural. Disasters caused by man, especially war disasters, that aim at wiping out an human group, have different characteristics. They often aim at destroying people, dislocating and demoralizing the group at the same time. In this sense, there is no mystery: attacks are visible; invaders perfectly identified.

In the case of chemical warfare with defoliants and herbicides, the catastrophe was of mixed nature. On one hand, poison spreading was perfectly visible and attributable to “American” aircraft, but on the other, there were neither bombs nor napalm, but a chemical. The destruction provoked by the products spread can, as we can see, be likened to a disturbance of Nature. We will expatiate on this point.

The paradox of acts of war that can appear as a disturbance of Nature

Faced with a catastrophe that appears as a disturbance of Nature, people and human groups can resort to conflicting explanations. That can be an object of polemic (theological explanation versus scientific theory, for instance). But sometimes, the same people have many registers of explanation: rational and imaginary, for example.

So, after the earthquake that happened in Algeria in May 2003, the explanation given by mosques, taken up by the President of the Republic, was that the disaster was a punishment afflicted by a severe god to people who were not good Muslims. Women who don't wear veil were particularly affected. Yet there were other causes: plate tectonics, or according to Berber tales (pre-Muslim culture), a bull that carries the Earth on its head suddenly shakes itself. Or else,

there is an explanation given to children: the Earth is living. It breathes, and moves...

There is no doubt, for a rational spirit, that plate tectonics has more convincing arguments than the movement of the bull carrying the Earth, but is this rational explanation thinkable to the bitter end? May we accept an absolute misfortune without resorting to explanations that humanize the situation, and place – even in an imaginary manner – the subject again at the centre of an event in which it has been swept away as if it is weightless? After all, most people know that the Sun doesn't revolve round the Earth and, in a lot of cultures, people talk about sunrise and sunset. To humanize Nature has never been incompatible with the rational, even highbrow, thought: Did we hear the announcement by the Director of the *Deep Impact* program of Nasa that the comet Temple 1 was about to “have a big surprise” when a exploratory machine is going to crash onto its surface?

The appalling success of the explanation, that induces feelings of guilt, given by Muslim fundamentalists in Algeria, and also in Turkey in 1999 (explanation by women's guilt), was certainly due to the will to manipulate uneducated people's opinion. But does it allow to settle a psychological problem posed to everyone in such a situation: How to imagine that Nature can, by accident, destroy my town any time now, killing 15.000 people in a flash? How not to know whether the event is going to happen again in a minute or in 500 years?. On the affective plane, when the uncertainty implies a stake, it is practically unthinkable in rational criteria, because it sends the humans back to a feeling of absolute helplessness. The

explanation, that denotes the wrath of a god and the mistake of people, is more easily adopted.

In the particular case of defoliation, its action on Nature and the troubles it engenders among humans did not first pose problems of interpretation: skin was irritated by an aggressive substance, eyes were filled with tears, animals did not survive..., poisoning was immediately visible, and it proceeded from the enemy's obvious will to destroy environment. But when Nature proved to be lastingly disturbed by repeated defoliation, causing unusual diseases, the shortage of explanations was felt.

The most meaningful explanation, since it puts again the misfortune in a traditional frame, is that *genii*, offended and incensed by boundless damage done by man to Nature, have caused all sorts of diseases to him.

That is the explanation given us by Mr. H., a friend of a family composed of a seriously handicapped girl on the motor plane (and not on the mental plane) and another whose children show the same type of malformations as their aunt:

"Prior to the war, there were genii in the forest and shamans". But all trees have been destroyed by dioxin. That is why genii moved farther. They are not dead, but people cannot "see" them any more.

Question: Can people "see" the genii?

Answer: Shamans can see them. Genii wear long beard and white hair...

Question: You have believed that diseases came from forest destruction, which has displeased the genii?

Answer: Yes, every disease was previously caused by genii of forest and phantoms. Now people think it is dioxin. Shamans know whether those diseases are caused by genii of forest, brook, or earth..."

Dialogue was previously possible between shamans and discontented *genii*:

If the disease is caused by genii of forest, the shaman goes singing in the forest and gathers tree leaves for the healing ceremony. Then he comes back to the sick person's home. If it is a slight discomfort, a chicken will be sacrificed, if it is a grave disease, a cow will be killed, and people share the animal among themselves, except the sick person who doesn't eat⁷. And the ceremony continues using ritually the leaves picked up in the forest to rub the sick person's body.

If it is ineffective, people will then say that the illness is not caused by genii, but by "dioxin".

In what this man says, the explanation with "dioxin" goes hand in hand with the traditional thought, even if the debate is closed "officially" by the explanation of dioxin. So the way is open for men's guilt to express itself. And it is possible that disturbances of Nature have a meaning, and that human beings, far from being helpless victims, have got something to do in the way natural forces sent them misfortunes.

3. Traumas of dioxin: from the distorting mirror to the broken mirror

In what has been written, people attribute to "dioxin" the effects of defoliants and herbicides

⁷ In some shamanist treatments, all those who take part in the healing ceremony absorb, through the sacrificed animal, part of the pathogenic principle. In those conditions, people understand that the sick person is excused from eating.

(“with dioxin, all trees have been destroyed”). How are now diseases truly imputable to dioxin? The appearance of children with deformed, even very atrophied, limbs and other serious malformations has been reported before 1970 by health departments of the FLN. Professor Alexandre Minkowski said during a colloquium in Orsay (France) that “it can be another affair of thalidomide⁸”. That is a sign of another order of evil. Its mechanics of action were noiseless, invisible and hardly interpretable for medicine as well as for victims. They have nothing to do with the destruction of vegetation, and they produce serious effects in the body of adults, newborn children, and in the chain of generations: miscarriages, and malformations that seem now transmittable.

It is important to specify the nature of damages especially caused to newborn children. Endless miscarriages and the birth given to misshapen children can be a product of a fetal suffering in the womb. So they are troubles connected to the contamination of the body of parents. They hit unborn child to the extent that it is first a component of the father’s body (spermatozoon) and above all the mother. Later on, the same question will be posed with the contamination by breast-feeding. In those cases, the child is directly struck. There may be congenital damages if they emerge at birth, but they are not genetically-transmitted. In those cases, the embryo’s body is hit like that of adults. With adults, dioxin can trigger off a

whole combination of diseases⁹. Children are most often affected by development disruptions, neurological illnesses, and malformations.

But assumption insists that children will be born misshapen as the result of genetic troubles, that is to say troubles that can be transmitted skipping one or more generations (the case of the children of Mr. H’s friend). Mechanics of action of dioxin are unknown in such a hypothesis, and it is not much sought-for by the international scientific community. As for us, we have suggested the effect of what protects the genome system¹⁰

But from the viewpoint of population, may we content ourselves with denoting “dioxin” by one word, a substance often mistaken for the defoliant, of which it is in fact only an impurity, and faced with which, medicine proves to be powerless.

In reality, it seems that the explanation by dioxin, very abstract to conceive, has brought an element of dispossession as well as a relief. So, when the three above-mentioned war veterans recall the moment when abnormal children appeared in great numbers, they talk about an explanation by the polluted food they must swallow, but associations of ideas quickly lead them to understand the condition of women in fighting, the deliveries under fire. Those are explanations they adhere to, since these explanations are congruent with their real experience of war, and since those explanations make them actors of the situation. By scientific explanation, they are deprived of their traditional interpretations, and they are faced with an

⁸ Thalidomide has been developed in 1954 by the laboratory *Chemie Grünenthal*. On the basis of animal experimentation, it appears as a sleeping drug that presents no risk of suicide. It has been distributed in West Germany in 1957, then in 46 countries. Four years later, health authorities yield to the evidence that this medicine is the cause of malformations among newborn children of women having taken it during pregnancy.

⁹ Often cited are chronic lymphoid leukaemia, cancer, sperma abnormality, children’s malformation...

extremely abstract explanation of phenomena concerning each day, in a very strong manner. the intimacy of their life and their feelings. However, this feeling of being deprived of “their” explanations is counterbalanced by the fact that explanation by dioxin probably relieved them of their feeling of responsibility which, in this case, can appear overwhelming to them. It also shows them that they are not on their own, that they fight for the national, even international, cause:

“After the war, monstrous children begin to be born. The first of them are thought to be abandoned to their fate. But when there are many sick children like them, people think that they have eaten blackened manioc tubers and dead fish as they were very hungry during the war, everything being destroyed by defoliation...[...] And then, women’s condition during the war was very sad. When people had to leave trenches, they must carry very heavy baskets on their back. Some of them were pregnant, and sometimes these women must have their babies on the way. Then they must be helped. [...] There has not been television until recent years, and people are now informed by television of many malformed children in other regions of Vietnam”.

Limits of interest for expert survey

Moreover, expert debates are a true headache, because the imputability of a disease to dioxin can only be proved for each case if we have dosimeters and pathogenic markers. Do people hide perfectly concrete questions, such as

the anxiety before the future of families with handicapped children?¹¹.

Still, in a situation like that of A Luoi valley where there is no follow-up to pregnancy by ultrasound scan, and so no prenatal diagnosis, it appears important to the psychologist to assess the fear of having an abnormal baby. And it is important, for the social scientist, to understand the rational and magic course of action couples take to keep off the possibility of misfortune.

We know from a conversation with a couple in A Dot that the young woman was afraid of being unable to bring to completion a second pregnancy. She already had a little girl of 4 and a half years old, then she suffered three miscarriages. The marriage of the couple had been held properly. A wedding dinner was offered to all the community. At last, the bridegroom’s mother isolated herself with the couple. She divided in half a banana which she gave the couple, which means that the consummation of marriage was authorized. The couple then offered each other necklaces making wish of health and fertility. These necklaces now consist of little plastic bags holding bulbs grown in the region, and they keep off evil spirits that may cause miscarriages.

This woman suffers from very painful periods. During menstruations, she is debilitated and remains prostrate. But the couple is certain that everything will be back to order if they have a second child, and especially a son. The preference for the son, shared by the father and mother, consists not merely in a patriarchal prejudice in favour of the male domination. In a system of patriarchy marriage, a son, even a

¹⁰ The dioxin produces very polymorphous effects. A better identification of pathogenic processes would allow to find out these effects more effectively..

¹¹ Maître, J. & Doray B. *Le vécu des familles victimes de l’agent orange*, dans Association d’Amitié Franco-Vietnamienne, *L’agent orange au*

married one, continues to live with his parents, and cares for his ageing parents. The couple's dread of miscarriages corresponds to worries over childbearing. What is more, their anguish has rational motives, since the couple embarks on the construction of a permanent structure, where they contemplate the future of a male lineage that keeps people waiting.

4. "Classical" war traumas

We understand by "classical" war traumas the ones induced in conventional battles whose fierceness is known in the war of liberation of Southern Vietnam. In the course of our investigation in A Luoi valley, and also in Hanoi, we have been struck by the frequency of war traumas that are not recognized.

In 1997, we have gathered a 12-page autobiographic account¹² of Mr. Do Ngoc Yen. The particularity of this account consists in the fact that the dramatic episodes seem to be implacably linked together, each drama announcing the following by a certain warning sign. Two episodes highlight this man's fate. One day, seriously injured, he wakes up in an underground field hospital. He has a candle that a companion lends him and a mirror bearing the inscription "*unforgettable memory*", offered him by his fiancée.

He sees in the mirror a face that he cannot recognize as his: a bloated face between two shoulders. *One cannot say this was an human shape*. Nearly 30 years later, he will always hide his neck, the scar of which does not appear very unsightly. This deformity has a sense: with his

wound, he is no more a human shape. That enigmatic feeling is less connected with the injury itself than another episode that precedes this one. In a farm accommodating other injured people, a friend has stepped on a mine, and died not long after with dignity. His companions were two exhausted to bury him well. This friend's corpse is torn to pieces twice: by tigers and by a bomb exploding next to his burial place. This friend becomes a wandering soul that Yen sights in dreams. And Yen himself is just within the human world. He becomes then a wanderer, avoiding his family and going to East Germany.

This summarized account is a literary exercise, but its framework is true (a film has been made to gather the precise linking of those events)¹³. The literary narration facilitates the overtaking of the trauma, particularly if it circulates in a social space, as it was the case with this small text. The event, recoded in culture, restores a position of social subject where only remains the void of sense of the trauma¹⁴.

To talk together about traumas

In A Dot, war veterans used to get together to recall a war which broke out 40 or 50 years ago, and they talk about their traumatic dreams:

"I still dream at night of those moments when there was nothing more to eat. The war is two horrifying, and in those nightmares, I see myself again and see again my dead companions and others still alive.

Vietnam, crime d'hier, tragédie d'aujourd'hui., Tirésias 2005.

¹² Do Ngoc Yen: *The war in myself and in the eyes of others*, translated by Dang Phuong Kiet, document CEDRATE.

¹³ Doray, B *Le dit du soldat Yen*, film made by CEDRATE.

¹⁴ According to our definition, a psychical trauma is not an event outside the experience of the subject (the fact of being amidst bombing, for example).

Question: Have you reasons to get angry, sometimes?

Answer: Pains persist and we feel an inner anger with the “Americans”. We don’t know to talk about this to people other than those who have lived through the war. Our children cannot understand us, except that they know a little through television.

I had nightmares during the war, and that was normal, but why do I see again scenes of war after the war? Suddenly, at night. It is very strange. Those are the same nightmares, the same companions. Years have gone by and nightmares always resemble one another.

But there are sometimes happy dreams, I dream of my very close companions. We get together by a brook long after.

Since all war veterans have nightmares, someone think that perhaps blood doesn’t circulate normally in our body, and that it is the cause of nightmares. As for me, I think rather that it is linked to a strong emotion. To call up memories can give a sense a relief, but we should talk to our children. We shouldn’t cut ourselves off from them. If the children are normal, they can hear us, except for those falling ill.

Question: Can you speak of these nightmares to women who have lived through the war?

Answer of a woman: I have taken part in the war for 15 years as a soldier working for the logistics. I also have nightmares of which I speak to other women in the Association of war veterans, but we, women, get together less often. I see again companions, dead or alive, but my husband speaks of the war much more than I do.

Question: How old were you by the time you start to fight?

Answer: I was 17 old”.

It is not easy to pass the experience of war in a personal and sensitive way on to the next generation. There is a phenomenon that one often finds again in such situations (the same old things said by soldiers of the First World war, that have given rise to the depreciatory concept of “stories of war veterans...)

This difficulty of communicating history probably explains the existence of pathologic modes of transmission that we have observed.

So in a village of A Luoi valley, people showed us two girls supposedly deaf, whose parents were exposed to Agent Orange. The conversation with their father, on his own in his tiled house (which indicates a social status, confirmed by some diplomas put in a conspicuous place), gave us an impression of strangeness because there are signs of inner tension shown by this man. The meeting with the eldest daughter indicated that she reacted to a moderate but unexpected noise (so she can hear), but that, on the other hand, she withdrew into herself. So it was more a serious psychological problem than a sensory trouble (the deafness). Her mother told us about her husband’s symptoms of traumas linked to the war. In particular, this man had fits of violence that he hardly controlled. One may say that he brought to the house the violence of his former battles. This situation was pathogenic to his family circle. How can the daughters link this verbal and physical violence to an historical situation, real and comprehensible, if this father was unable to pass on his experience of war, that his close relatives can hear and understand?

We have found again the same question in Hanoi, with the family of Mr. O already mentioned. The story of this man has given rise to discussions and comments in the course of a colloquium held in Hanoi University in October 2003, entitled *Spontaneous and Therapeutical life stories*. Afterwards, we met the whole family and tried to understand the reasons of the suffering of his son, Y., a teenager who showed psychological troubles due to dioxin. In this meeting, Mr. O. related his very hard battles fought with bravery, insisting on an exploit, a shot hitting an enemy plane whose pilot has been captured. During the meeting, he simply informed us of his headaches. Her wife talked with deep emotion to us about the hardships of their material life. During this conversation, her son came near and stared at us for a long time while remaining prostrate and dumb. We have come back to hold a conversation with this young man. This time, he spoke a lot of himself: his rather childish projects, his taste for nice tea-shirts, etc...He told us about his fits of headache like his father, as if the head “shrinks”. And he had nightmares during the night, with scenes of violence “like on television”, or like a bloody accident he has witnessed next to his home. And then Y. told us that his father continued to wage war in the sleep. The ta! ta! ta! of imaginary kalashnikovs et the martial cries “charge!” then brutally pierce the family night. He remembers that when he was younger, this nightly activity of his father frightened him very much. When we asked Y. what has been that war that his father continues to play during family nights, he answered that he did not know it, and he never had a conversation about it. For him, that war only stemmed from his father’s trauma: a simple frightening gesticulation.

Traumas in the system of family relations

In other situations, the child can become a persecuting element because he revives the trauma suffered by his father who has fought. That is the case with H. V. Truong from Hong Kim village.

WHEN A FAMILY MEMBER REKINDLES THE TRAUMA EXPERIENCED BY ANOTHER

This young man appears much mutilated. His right arm is mutilated of the hand, his left hand is mutilated of many fingers, his right leg is amputated of the foot. He wears no prosthesis. He appears neglected, with moustaches and tousled long hair. And he has traces of cigarette burn on the thorax. In an early time, he wants to give an impression that all his mutilations are self-inflicted injuries.

To our question, he answers that if he burns himself with a cigarette; it is because cigarettes hold no fears for him. Those apparently absurd words have a meaning when one knows the real cause of his injuries: a grenade has exploded in the garden of his house.

In the course of our visit, the father, an ex-servicemen, talks to us about his war. He was wounded and went to the countryside to convalesce, in Northern Vietnam, and he has met his wife there.

When we ask the father about what he has felt by the time the accident happened to his son, he cannot reply to our question at first, and then he eventually says he has never been so terrified. His son reacts immediately: he quickly goes away hopping on his only leg, and disappears behind the house.

In the case of this father and his son, it seems that the perceptible tension between these two people is due to the fact that the son is a living reminder of the moment when his father, a

courageous fighter, was seized by “the most terrible fear” while carrying his son’s torn body in his arms. This is explained in this way. The great traumas induced by war or by another cause give rise to a cleavage in the psychism. The representation of traumatic scenes is isolated from the rest of the psychism and emptied of its effects. That is an unconscious mechanism that allows the subject to live with this memory without the feeling of having truly preserved the memory of it. But it is possible that another event rekindles in a way the first traumas, completely destabilizing the defenses that the psychism had organized around the memory of traumas, and then discharging torrents of fear and suffering that were tied up to the “cleaved” memory.

So, Mrs. M. was 23 years old when the genocide was perpetrated in Rwanda against the Tutsi ethnic minority. She has seen lots of corpses in Kigali, and then, fleeing on foot from her country through the Republic of Congo, she has seen many other massacres. Coming to France with her two children she had meanwhile, she scarcely shows emotion when recalling the terrible events she has been faced with.

She is then keyed-up in a strategy of integration in France, and seems never to return to her past. Nevertheless, one day, she will arrive with a tear-stained face. Shivering, she appears nearly in a trance. She started a post-traumatic neurosis relating to the events experienced ten years ago. This state is owing to the fact that she has personally taken care of the last moments of a man she hardly knew, who died in the house that has taken her in. All that occurred as if the fact of considering a dead man as a person had brutally given the humane dimension to all other dead people she met in her flight from Rwanda,

the dead people that the traumatic cleavage had reduced to abstractions of human beings.

A MAN — MEMORY

In other situations, a family member seems to make him a kind of memorial that represents a person already dead, while others in the family have quickly turned the page. We have met this problem in Algeria, with the case of Farida, a little girl of 9 years old. She went with her mother to see her grandparents in a neighbouring village, and her mother wanted to visit the house of an uncle opposed to Islamic fundamentalists and who had to flee. Farida is the only one to have seen her mother go and come near to the house with her sister of 4 years old. The house was booby-trapped by her uncle’s enemies. A bomb has exploded, and the ground was suddenly littered with strips of flesh. Afterwards, the family regularly came to the burial-ground to honour the two dead people, but later, this bereavement was rapidly forgotten: for three years, the father remarried, get divorced, and remarried again...Only Farida seemed immobilized, and everything appeared blocked in her: She stammered, was enuretic, and learned nothing at school. She appeared to be the keeper of the petrified memory of the traumatic event, of which everyone seems to turn the page.

In A Luoi, we have so met a man-memory.

In the village of A Ngo, a very cramped house has become a place where a Ta Oi of nearly 50 years old leads the life of a recluse. He is the third member of a family of 10. He remains motionless. The family speaks of a very high fever occurring 15 years ago, accompanied with memory loss. He has been isolated in this house by his closest relatives who were afraid of a kind of contamination. This disease has occurred after the father’s death. Now, this man showed identical symptoms after one brother’s

death. The physician has diagnosed amnesia and prescribed the medicines that must eventually be renounced since the sick man cannot take them.

We were intrigued with the forearms of this man without vitality, covered with tattoos consisting in a phrase: “*For friends, life is very hard*”. This fact would be banal if this man has not told us with a liveliness, which he found again, that he has his forearms tattooed during the time he served in the army, while he has never done military service. It is his father who has waged war and died prematurely. This man seemed to us the living memory of his father.

Two remarks

We won't leave the sphere of traumas without making a remark on the comparison between the shamanist modalities of health care, and the one that is in most current use in the West. In A Luoi, where shamanist culture is still a firmly fixed framework of thinking, one may suppose that the psychological approach to this question of traumas would give rise to a transcultural reflection.

The current importance of traditional medicines

In the West, from the *Shell-shock* of the great war until the all-purpose concept of ductility, based upon a metallurgical metaphor, the trauma is considered on the mode of an attack from outside, and one tries to mend it in various manners that, save psychoanalysis, fall within the province of a kind of exorcism.

In shamanist cultures, it is the opposite. Trauma is not an intruder that must be expelled. It is part of the “soul” which came out of the body. One must look for it and negotiate its return by a practice of endorcism: not only for the subject to find peace again, but for the world order to be restored.

The model of occidental individualism is evidently not adapted to a culture that thinks the individual to be inseparable from the equilibrium of his human and natural environment. So this model would not be shown on Central Highlands. But we will add that, if we observe without prejudice the real needs of citizens of occidental societies that fall victim to psychical traumas, we may think that they would be cared for by approaches which, like the traditional shamanist approach, forge again symbolical links between the individual and his world. In other words, we should not idealize traditional therapies because they are generally unaware of the medical science's contribution. But they sometimes, in a sense, are more modern than medicine by the schemas of intervention they propose, since they see at first the person and his closest relatives in the symptom, while medicine often tends to wipe out the person and his cultural and human world to see only the symptom.

Our second remark is that, the headway made by technical progress and, more generally, by “modernization” produces not merely the effects that reject ethnic minorities on the edge of history: in the valley of A Luoi, the emergence of television and the numerous films screened on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the 1975 victory have been a shock therapy: children have realized that old men did not tell fables when they spoke of the forest, wild elephants and tigers, or when generations who have lived through the war spoke of the violence of battles and the will of the enemy to wipe out their people. So, the emergence of television has contributed to forging again the links between generations.